

# Western Costume, closet to the stars, turns 100

For 100 years, Western Costume has been helping Hollywood get into character with period-perfect wardrobes. Its clothes are seen in legions of films and shows.



By Adam Tschorn Los Angeles Times

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To the casual passerby, there's nothing remarkable about the 120,000-square-foot former printing plant fronting a sun-baked stretch of Vanowen Street in North Hollywood. There's nothing to indicate that, just beyond the double doors, gangsters are earning their stripes, "Mad Men" are being made and entire armies are getting outfitted in a rabbit warren of rooms flanked by a cavernous warehouse crammed with period clothing from multiple eras.

Few would guess that, just upstairs, Christopher Plummer's jacket from "The Sound of Music" is rubbing elbows with Vivien Leigh's Walter Plunkett-designed buckboard dress from "Gone With the Wind," not far from a feathered headdress once worn by Cary Grant in "To Catch a Thief." The latter's outsized plumage brushes against both a dress worn by Mitzi Gaynor in "South Pacific" and the colorful jackets worn by the brothers Gibb in "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band."

There's a tumult of top hats, tank tops, tunics, '20s-era trousers, breastplates, bowlers and beads that have circulated in and out of the low-profile building to high-profile appearances on television and movie screens, theater stages and video-game consoles for nearly 100 years.

June 30 will be exactly a century since L.L. Burns and Harry Revier signed papers establishing a business to supply Los Angeles' fledgling motion picture industry with stages, props, sets and costumes. The business, in short order operating under the name Western Costume Co., would eventually become one of the largest costume houses in the world, responsible for sewing the sequins on Dorothy's ruby slippers, making Leigh's dresses and Clark Gable's suits for "Gone With the Wind" and providing clothes for hundreds of thousands of screens, dating from Cecil B. DeMille's 1914 feature-length film "The Squaw Man" to the current season of AMC's "Mad Men."

"Western really represents the pantheon of Hollywood," says Deborah Nadoolman Landis, David C. Copley chair for the study of costume design at the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. "[It] is the cultural and institutional memory of the field of costuming in Hollywood."

Consider the breadth of her own experience with Western. Landis initially worked with the costume house in 1976 while designing the wardrobe for her first movie (1977's "The Kentucky Fried Movie"), later turned to Western Costume's head tailor Ruben Rubalcava to make the prototype for Indiana Jones' costume for "Raiders of the Lost Ark" and was back just a few weeks ago to pick up a re-created pair of "Wizard of Oz" ruby slippers for an upcoming exhibition titled "Hollywood Costume" she helped curate for the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

Since its co-founding by Burns, who is often characterized as a "trader in American Indian goods," Western Costume Co. has had numerous owners (from salvage operators to a coalition of movie studios) and relocated several times. But the most critical change came in 1988 when Paramount purchased Western, which was located adjacent to the studio's lot on Melrose Avenue, for the real estate beneath it. Ten months later, Paramount sold the company — sans the land and building — with the stipulation that the new owner move the vast collection within a year.

That new owner — AHS Trinity Group, a trio of businessman composed of CAA co-founder Bill Haber, author Sidney Sheldon and businessman Paul Abramowitz — tapped a costumer by the name of Eddie Marks to coordinate the colossal 30-day move over the hill to the current North Hollywood location in 1989.

"Those were some of the toughest years — 1989 to 1992," says Marks, who has been president of the company for the last 20 years. "Business was down, the company was sold and part of the deal with Paramount was that the company had to move."

On a recent tour, Marks points out eight miles of hanging pipe stacked two stories high that contains 3.5 million to 5 million pieces of clothing, pairs of shoes, hats and accessories. Most of the apparel is divided among three airplane-hangar-like rooms. One holds women's period costumes, another has men's period costumes and the third contains all manner of uniforms, from those of ancient Rome to the U.S. Navy's most up-to-date camouflage. A map tacked near the entrance of the uniform room describes the contents of one rack with notations such as "Togas," "Ancient," "Arabic," "Egyptian," "Roman," "Greek," "Armor," "Vikings," "Kitchen," "Hospital," "Confederate Civil War" and "Union Civil War." What can't be found in the stacks, Marks explains, can be custom-made in one of the adjoining rooms, which include a men's tailor shop, a women's made-to-order workroom, a millinery shop and a shoe and boot shop.

Western is not the only local costume house serving the entertainment industry (other major players include Palace Costume Co., American Costume Corp. and Costume Rentals Corp.), but, over the years, it has carved out a niche.

"Western's strength is American clothing of the '20s through the '50s, maybe the '60s," Landis says. "If you were doing anything — a gangster movie, film noir, any period film — you would just have to walk around to know it'd be your first stop."

Although Marks likes to frame it as a wider period of "anything from the 1200s up to about 2000," he says that's about as contemporary as they get. "We stay period, for the most part, and the studios stay contemporary."

Another of Western's strong suits is garbing the masses — being able to transform thousands of background actors into authentically costumed occupants of a Parisian train station circa 1931 (as Western did in "Hugo"), a modern-day naval carrier (for "Battleship") or the halls of Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce ("Mad Men"). Costuming a period movie's low-profile players may not seem as glamorous as dressing the principal actors, but since each weekly costume rental averages \$100 to \$200, it does make good business sense.

Marks won't discuss revenue of the privately held company (of which Haber has been the sole owner since 1995), but says 2011 was the best year it's had in 20-plus years, pointing to the boom in period television as a major factor. "We did a lot of those shows — 'Mad Men,' 'Boardwalk Empire,' 'Magic City,' 'Playboy' and 'Pan Am.' If those had been contemporary shows, we probably wouldn't have been on their radar."

Western's collection of period costumes is complemented by a 50,000-volume research library stocked not only with books but also with personal papers, costume designers' sketches and vintage issues of style magazines such as Vogue, Harper's Bazaar and Godey's Lady's Book.

Just beyond the library is a small room containing Western's crown jewels, part of the 6,000-piece "star collection" archive. It's a rarefied fraternity of frocks that includes Rudolph Valentino's robes from "Son of the Sheik," Plummer's jacket from "The Sound of Music," Leigh's buckboard dress from "Gone With the Wind" and the striped prison garb from "Papillon."

Those iconic pieces hammer home just how much the company has become part of the fabric of Hollywood over the last 100 years.

For the last few weeks, the company's 60 employees have been hard at work putting together a selection of looks that will convey Western's place in the pantheon of costume design as effectively as the clothes in that room do. These will be part of a gala event Wednesday in conjunction with the Costume Council of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art that will include a panel discussion and pageant-like presentation of costumes.

Some models will be wearing the genuine article (a fur-trimmed polka dot jacket worn by Bérénice Bejo in "The Artist" is expected to make an appearance, for example). Others will be garbed in replica wardrobe pieces. Shoemaker Mauricio Osorio spent the better part of three workdays re-creating from grainy screen shots the brown suede lace-up boots Errol Flynn wore in 1938's "The Adventures of Robin Hood," using a 100-year-old industrial-size Singer sewing machine that, in all likelihood, was the same one that stitched together the first pair.

Research librarian and archivist Bobi Garland is quick to point out that when it comes to authenticity and accuracy, no expense has been spared. She holds aloft a photo of Leigh's green velvet "curtain dress" from "Gone With the Wind" — perhaps one of the most recognizable dresses in cinema history and now residing in the collection of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. She motions to the belt of heavy, braided cord.

"We're re-creating this dress for the event," she says, "right down to the perfect tassels."

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